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Towards Empowering Oral Cultures Through Literacy

William Eggington
Brigham Young University

The underlying hypothesis of this paper is that individual mastery of print registers occurs best when the learner's oral culture develops a strong literate component. Thus the acquisition of higher literacy skills is more a group social issue than an individual pedagogical one. This hypothesis will be explored by reference to planned and unplanned social changes which have occurred in an Australian Aboriginal oral culture community in the Northern Territory of Australia as community members assume some aspects of literate culture—and in the process gain more control over their lives. It is hoped that the conclusions reached will be generalizable to other minority indigenous, immigrant and refugee communities.

INTRODUCTION

In broad terms this paper will investigate a recent, somewhat startling, phenomenon in Aboriginal education in the Northern Territory of Australia. This phenomenon has far reaching implications in that part of the world and, I believe, has some generalizability to other similar situations here in the United States. The phenomenon? Success in Aboriginal education. To understand why I have labeled this success a phenomenon, I will first review some background information concerning the Aboriginal people and Aboriginal education in the Northern Territory. Next I will trace the development of the above mentioned success. I will then analyze what I believe to be the theoretical principles underlying that success and will conclude with ways that these principles could be applied to similar situations.

THE NORTHERN TERRITORY ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY

The pre-European history of Aboriginal people in Australia extends approximately 40,000 years into the past. Since Aboriginal people formed hunter-gatherer oral cultures, much of the history of this extensive period is intertwined with dreamtime mythology and traditions.

An estimated 300,000 indigenous or Aboriginal people inhabited the Australian continent at the time of initial European settlement in 1788. The history of Aboriginal people since then can fall into a number of stages; namely the domesticate or exterminate period from 1788 to the 1860's; the protectionist period from the 1860's to the 1940's; the assimilationist period from the 1940's to the 1960's; and the self-determination and management period which continues up to the present time (Baldauf and Eggington, 1989). Since 1983 this self-determination policy has been seen as creating a situation where:

Aboriginals have sufficient economic independence to enjoy the civil
and political rights provided in our system; and where they can control basic services such as health, education, housing, so that they come in a form and of a standard that meet Aboriginal needs as defined by the Aboriginal people themselves (House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education, 1985).

In 1788 there were between 200 and 650 Aboriginal languages spoken in Australia, depending upon which definitions of the terms 'language' and 'dialect' are used (Senate Standing Committee on Education and the Arts, 1984). The two hundred years since European settlement have seen a dramatic decline in these languages to the point where only eight languages survive today with more than 1,000 speakers (Baldauf and Eggington, 1989), five of these languages are in the Northern Territory of Australia. Black (1983) estimates that, in addition to these five languages, there are twenty-five languages surviving in the Northern Territory with one hundred or more speakers. Thus, of the 35,000 Aboriginal people living in the Northern Territory, there are 20,000 speakers of one or more Aboriginal language.

In the early days of European settlement in the Northern Territory an English based contact language developed which has followed the contact language, minimal pidgin, pidgin, extended pidgin, initial creole to extended creole continuum (Todd, 1974; Muhlhausler, 1986; Romaine, 1988). This creole or Kriol is becoming the lingua franca of the Aboriginal people of the Northern Territory with an estimated 20,000 speakers (Sandefur and Harris, 1986).

However, the English language remains as the dominant language in almost all domains requiring interaction with the ever-present non-Aboriginal society. It is the language of communication with government, health, commerce and education programs. Unfortunately, significant communication barriers exist due to a number of factors including inadequate English language proficiency levels among the Aboriginal people, cultural insensitivity among the English speaking non-Aboriginal people and huge differences in communication strategies between the two groups (Shimpo, 1985). As may be guessed, the English spoken by the Aboriginal people, Aboriginal English, exists as a non-standard, low status variety of the language.

Formal western style education came to Aboriginal people when various Christian churches established mission schools in Aboriginal community settlements. These community mission schools were eventually taken over first by Federal and then Territory Education Departments. Enrollment figures for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in the Northern Territory are given in Table 1.
TABLE 1
Northern Territory Schools
Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Enrollments, July 1987

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Aboriginal</th>
<th>Non-Aboriginal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-school</td>
<td>1067</td>
<td>2091</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>7282</td>
<td>14406</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior Secondary</td>
<td>1775</td>
<td>5061</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Secondary</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>2765</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ungraded</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>516</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>10492</td>
<td>24839</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Northern Territory Department of Education, 1987

Note the low number of Aboriginal students enrolled in secondary programs. To date, not a single Aboriginal youth from a traditional background has graduated from a Northern Territory High School. These figures do not point out the considerable absenteeism in Aboriginal schools, or the apparent lack of enthusiasm for western-style education. Literacy levels are very low with most youth leaving school with a third grade reading level.

In addition, Walton (1989) estimates that there are another 1417 Aboriginal students not enrolled in any school program. This is because many Aboriginal people have chosen to return to "Homeland Centres" in order to live a traditional lifestyle in tribal lands. However as Walton points out,

a minimum of 12 school age children is set (as a guide) for the establishment of a homeland centre school, thereby precluding many outstation children from existing services. Non-Aboriginal families on cattle stations with one school age child do have access to School of the Air. The question seems to be put for non-Aboriginal Territorians along these lines, "How can a service be provided for all school age children?"; while for NT Aborigines it is more like, "If they request a service, what is the minimum we might provide?" (p. 3).

In an effort to better meet the educational needs of the Northern Territory Aboriginal people, the Australian government introduced a Bilingual Education program in 1972. This program now consists of 16 bilingual schools and has had mixed results in achieving its stated objectives (Eggington and Baldauf, 1989).

The effectiveness of one such bilingual school program was reported in TESOL Quarterly in 1981 (Gale, McClay, Christie and Harris, 1981). This report provided statistical evidence verifying that this bilingual program was achieving a measurable degree of success. However, in 1986 I visited that same school and found a skeleton bilingual-in-name-only program. Most of
the bilingual material which had been developed during the golden years of the program reported in the TESOL Quarterly article was lying in a dusty storage area unused by the new staff at the school. The program had fallen victim to reduced funding and frequent non-Aboriginal staff transfers which replaced experienced and committed staff with staff much less experienced in, and committed to, bilingual education. There was also very little community interest in the program. In general, the program had declined due to a subtle and usually unconscious form of institutionalized cultural insensitivity.

Educational achievement levels in the Northern Territory for Aboriginal people are well below national standards and significantly below Aboriginal student standards in other Australian states (House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education, 1985). The reasons for this are numerous and frequently discussed, a general consensus being that language and cultural differences are major factors contributing to poor educational achievement (Eades, 1985; Harris, 1980; Christie and Harris, 1985; Graham, 1986).

As Walton (1989) and Wearne (1986) have shown, and as I have alluded to in the homeland centre and bilingual education examples given above, there appears to be a structural inequality in many areas of Northern Territory society suggesting covert institutional racism. Using the term "institutional racism" may seem a little harsh, but I believe it can be found in many Western societies. Chambers and Pettman (1986) define it as,

a pattern of distribution of social goods, including power, which regularly and systematically advantages some ethnic and racial groups and disadvantages others. It operates through key institutions...(for example) the education system (p.7).

Cummins (1989) draws attention to "disabling structures" that are built into social access and equity systems. He states that,

groups that tend to experience the most pronounced education failure are those that have historically experienced a pattern of subjugation to the dominant group, over generations...the relationship between the majority and minority group is one which historically has led to an ambivalent and insecure identity among native minorities (Cummins, 1989).

Using Ogbu's classification system (Ogbu, 1988), Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory fall into the category of a "castelike" subordinate minority. He suggests that this particular type of minority group has been "either incorporated into a society more or less involuntarily and permanently or are forced to seek incorporation and then relegated to inferior status" (p. 232). He continues that social structures make it more difficult for an individual from a subordinate minority to "advance on the basis of individual training or ability" (p. 232).

Very few Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory are independent of support from the dominant culture. Many are losing their traditional values and cultures. Alcoholism, drug usage, petrol sniffing, malnutrition and poor health are epidemic in many communities. Despite heavy government
involvement, most Aboriginal settlements are of a third world housing and health standard. And yet people care. There are numerous non-Aboriginal educators, health workers, missionaries, government officials and politicians in the Northern Territory and throughout Australia who have devoted a significant portion of their lives in assisting Aboriginal people towards finding solutions to these problems. But successes are too few and too limited in scope while newer problems continue to develop. Every few years a new approach is tried only to be replaced by another direction and new hope. Government funds for ongoing support programs such as bilingual education are beginning to be questioned with an attitude developing among government politicians that non-Aboriginal Australians are doing enough, the problems and the solutions lie in, and with, the Aboriginal people (Walton, 1989).

Out of all this there appears to one ray of hope, one significant and substantial success. This phenomenon is Yirrkala School.

YIRRKALA SCHOOL

As I describe the development and nature of this success at Yirrkala I am indebted to Greg Wearne and the Master's Thesis he wrote on the subject in 1986. Greg was the Assistant principal at Yirrkala from 1982. He is now deputy principal of Nhulunbuy High School which is located 23 kilometers from Yirrkala. Throughout the remainder of this paper I will often refer to the Yirrkala people as Yolngu. It is their term for their people. I will also refer to white Australians as Balallda. This is an interesting Aboriginal word. It is used to refer to whites across the "top-end" of Australia. We didn't know its history until we realized that it is a Malay-Indonesian borrowed word. For at least 500 years before Europeans came to the far north of Australia, Indonesian fishermen were coming to the area in search of trepang. They had a lot of contact with Aboriginal people and told them about strange white men who called themselves "Hollanders". The word went through the usual phonological assimilation procedures to end up being balallda.

Yirrkala is a traditional Aboriginal coastal community of about 1,000 Aboriginal and 100 non-Aboriginal people located 700 kilometers east of Darwin. Although there was some contact with non-Aboriginal Australians or Balanda, the Yolngu or Yirrkala Aborigines remained isolated from non-Aboriginal culture until 1971. At that time a large mining operation commenced at Nhulunbuy, 23 kilometers away. Nhulunbuy now has a population of 4000 non-Aboriginal Australians. Since 1971, the Yolngu have managed to keep themselves distant from Nhulunbuy Balanda culture.

A small mission school was eventually established at Yirrkala during the 1950's. This school was taken over by the government in 1968. When the Federal Government introduced Bilingual Education into the Northern Territory in 1972, Yirrkala was chosen as one of the Bilingual Schools. Of course, bilingual education required a core of Aboriginal assistant teachers, but, at that time, there were no Aboriginal teachers or assistant teachers. Thus, a group of young adults, mostly female, were trained through various Aboriginal teacher training programs.

Up until 1982, Yirrkala could be seen as a typical bilingual school where
part of the curriculum was taught in English and part by the Aboriginal Assistant teachers in their language. Throughout the 16 Northern Territory bilingual schools those committed to bilingual education were beginning to worry that the hoped for results of bilingual education were not being seen. Students were not achieving better, they were not attending better and, in general, community members were not becoming involved.

However, perhaps because of their proximity to a Balanda mining town, the Yolngu people of Yirrkala were particularly concerned that their culture not only be preserved, but developed. They began to extend the concept of bilingual education to what they termed "both ways" education. They wanted community children not only be taught in two languages, but to learn to function in both Yolngu and Balanda ways at school. This meant that the curriculum had to be adjusted and that significant aspects of Balanda ways and learning had to be replaced by Yolngu ways and learning as part of the school's core curriculum. The Yolngu at Yirrkala began to want to be heard. In his thesis Wearne includes a significant statement on this subject expressed by the Aboriginal Community Development Officers.

Yolngu want bilingual education. They also want high standards. This is not happening as children are leaving school knowing nothing. Children still don't understand how (or why it is important) to learn to a high standard. Yolngu can do this if student teachers learn hard to be good teachers (same for nurses, doctors, mechanics, plumbers, farmers, navy, airforce) so that in turn they can help children to learn.

We need Yolngu and Balanda co-operating in schools. But the Balanda teacher must be one who can step back and support Yolngu, not take over. Many Balanda teachers find this hard to do. Balanda teachers should want to learn from Yolngu. Both learn, one form another. At Yirrkala there is strong community support for their own Yolngu teachers. These are the people who will help the children in homelands to develop "both ways" (Wearne, 1989, from an interview with Community Development Officers conducted by John Henry, Deakin University, November 1983).

As Yirrkala assistant teachers and community leaders began to toy with the idea of adjusting the curriculum, it became evident that they were moving into a sensitive area, one where self-determination policies were not allowed. The Northern Territory Department of Education had declared that "Aboriginal students should receive the same core curriculum as other N.T. students, with importance placed on centralized and standardized curricula" (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1983:17). In other words, Aboriginal children could be educated only if they learnt what we determined what was best for them--surely a form of institutionalized racism. Battle lines were beginning to be drawn, a power struggle was inevitable. There is insufficient time to recount all that occurred over the next period. I will, however, list a number of key events.

In 1983 the Yirrkala Community School Council was established by the school principal primarily to receive federal funding and to have community input into the non-essential elements of the school operation. The council membership consisted of some Aboriginal leaders and teachers and senior non-Aboriginal teachers. However the composition and agenda of the
council was shaped by the principal. Nothing much happened.

In early 1984 the council met with a new chairman, an articulate and forceful senior clan member. He began to reflect the growing desire for the community to be involved in the school. He held a meeting with Aboriginal teachers where minutes were kept and a decision made to send a letter to the Principal with a request that it be sent to the Department. The letter said in part:

During school appraisal, we were often told that Yirrkala had a Community school, and that 'we would work together to make things better'. We agree that this is the way it should be, but as parents and community members we must say that we are worried at the way the school is being staffed. It is time for you to listen to our wishes, and to start 'working together to make things better'. We cannot agree to European teachers who are unsatisfactory or to senior teachers who do not understand our wishes (Wunungmurra, 1984 as quoted in Wearne, 1986:58).

Some time after, the Principal received written notification from the chairman of a school council meeting to be held the next week. He became very upset suggesting that no meeting be held without his approval or presence.

During 1984, Yolngu teachers and community leaders suggested the formation of a "School Action Group". Balanda teachers scheduled a discussion of the topic at a "cultural development meeting". In contrast to other staff meetings, all the Yolngu teaching staff were early. Throughout the meeting, Yolngu teachers told each other in their own language to demonstrate enthusiasm, to be involved and not to be "tired or lazy".

Towards the end of 1984, staffing selections and promotion recommendations were to be submitted to the Department. As usual, decisions were made by the Principal with little discussion with Yolngu staff or community members. The Yolngu staff Action Group discussed staffing and submitted their own recommendations to the Community Council in writing. The letter explained why the Action Group felt they could make the recommendations, was very well written and was made public by the Community Council. The Principal responded immediately, and emotionally, by suggesting that "there's white involvement here" and that the feelings contained in the letter represented youthful exuberance out of step with older Aboriginal leaders. He stated that

this has put self-management back four years. The Yolngu have egg all over their faces. I've been working for self-management for 10 years. Why didn't they come to me first (as quoted in Wearne, 1986:68).

The skirmishes continued with the Aboriginal teachers becoming more and more skilled in using non-Aboriginal power structures. Eventually, they won. The institutional barriers preventing both ways core curriculum adaptation were removed, Aboriginal community members gained the power to negotiate staff selection and an Aboriginal senior teacher was promoted to become a co-principal of the school.
Indications are that, by 1991, a large majority of the teachers in the school will be trained Aboriginal teachers. In addition, the focus of discussion has changed from issues of control to issues of curriculum, secondary education and bilingual bothways education. It appears that the community is beginning to adapt western educational values to fit their culture and, in turn, is adapting their Aboriginal culture. There is cultural movement bothways and there is a sense of ownership of the school.

The concept of Aboriginal people gaining control of government schools is beginning to spread throughout the Northern Territory, but still Yirrkala remains the only community school to achieve control. Obviously, we need to ask a number of questions including; why did this happen at Yirrkala and not else where? and what mechanisms can be put in place for this to happen else where?

There are of course many contributing factors which enabled the Yolngu of Yirrkala to gain control and become involved in the educational process. Geographical location and community values seem essential ingredients. However, I would like to highlight one major variable.

It seems to me that the Yirrkala Aboriginal community were able to use a powerful technology in their battle. That technology is literacy. I make that assertion based upon the following pieces of evidence.

1. All the main Aboriginal participants were skilled at literacy. They were people who had been sent off to college as part of the bilingual education training program. As teachers in a western school, they were involved in "literacy" education. In their Aboriginal community they were "empowered" through their literacy skills and through being literacy teachers.

2. Many of the "watershed" events in the battle were responses to letters or submissions written by the Aboriginal people. These letters, in turn, were based on written minutes of meetings made by the Aboriginal people. In addition, many of these letters were "published" which suggested that the Aboriginal people involved knew the power associated with publishing.

3. Of greater significance than these two pieces of evidence is the fact that the Aboriginal people involved in this assertion of their power exhibited behavior which suggests that they were part of a literate culture as well as part of their more traditional oral culture. This, I believe is the key factor that contributed to this rare success in Aboriginal education.

To better understand this last point, it is necessary to review what has been labeled as the oral to literate culture continuum.

**THE PRIMARY ORAL CULTURE TO LITERATE CULTURE CONTINUUM**

Havelock (1988) has observed that "human culture is a creation of human communication" (p. 127). That is, the nature of communication within a
society will affect the culture that develops as a major part of that society. When we begin to investigate the nature of communication, we are confronted with two major classifications. Much human communication is oral and much is written.

We have begun to understand that the invention of an easy writing system by the Greeks around 600 BC introduced a new technology into human society that has affected those societies who adopted the technology to the point where specific and important components of the society changed, and have continued to change since then. These social changes allow us to make comparisons between literate cultures and oral cultures (Goody and Watt, 1988; Ong, 1988).

This line of research has been extended to include examination of oral residual cultures, literate cultures, high literate cultures, and a recent recognition of the possibility for some technological societies to develop aspects of a post-literate culture. For the purposes of this paper, I will concentrate on discussing aspects of oral and literate cultures.

Ong (1988) contends that since, in an oral culture, you know only that which can be recalled, communal memory is protected. Social and mystical power rests with the ones who know, repeaters of the past, knowers of the ancient law and those who have the right to speak of the past. Couple these values with the values generated by a "hunter-gatherer" culture whose main preoccupation is to hunt and gather for today because survival is a daily struggle and you have a culture that focuses, to a large extent, on the past, somewhat on the present to meet immediate needs, but seldom, if at all, on the future. With this focus on the past, obviously oral cultures are conservative or, as Ong suggests, homeostatic, always returning to stable values.

Let me stress here that I am not suggesting that those from oral cultures or, to be more specific, Aboriginal cultures, have limitations on their intellectual abilities or that we have the "great divide" of the language determines thought paradigm. What I am suggesting is that literacy can be thought of as a major technology which has so shaped some aspects of social interaction that we have a distinction between some aspects of the communal behavior of those societies that have used this technology and societies that have not had access to it.

Goody and Watt (1988) have stated that the "world of knowledge" transcends political and temporal units with the development of literacy. They quote Spengler's proclamation that "writing is the grand symbol of the Far" (p. 19). Thus, in literate cultures almost all the world's past and present literate knowledge is within reach to any individual. Information, thought and philosophies are gathered from beyond the immediate society and recallable time, threatening a homeostatic centralized power outlook and destroying cultural bonds. Rather than past knowledge simply dropping off the edge of recallable memory, it is preserved and layered creating an incredibly complex society. Because it is impossible to absorb all this accumulated knowledge one must be selective. This selectivity eventually results in individual or small group cultures contributing to the sense of alienation so often discussed with reference to our present culture.
Literacy has become so central to Western culture that we have assigned a number of metaphors to the ability to use this technology. They are not universal truths, but could be seen as part of the metaphors that we live by. Scribner (1984) labels three of these as "literacy as adaptation", "literacy as a state of grace" and "literacy as power".

The literacy-as-power metaphor recognizes that the acquisition of literacy skills by a group has been used to either allow that group to dominate non-literate groups or free that group from oppression by another literate group. Literate communities, and even literate individuals have access to the power structures of most democratic societies. To become literate can assist non-literate groups or individuals to have more individual control over their lives, to reach full group or individual potential, or to become "empowered" members of society. Pedagogical, psychological and sociological aspects of this metaphor have been developed and field-tested most extensively by Freire (1970, 1978). The "literacy as power" metaphor in relation to the Yirrkala Yolngu will be developed throughout the remainder of the paper.

Among the contrasts that can be made concerning oral and literate cultures, I would like to concentrate on those differences which involve power in terms of decision making processes, negotiation and agreement and contract making. These differences can be summarized in Table 2.
# TABLE 2
Oral Culture and Literate Culture Power Values

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Oral culture</th>
<th>Literate culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You only know that which can be recalled.</td>
<td>You have access to all information once it has been recorded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power discourse is <em>spoken</em> only by those who have the right to speak.</td>
<td>Power discourse is <em>written</em> by those representing power institutions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The spoken word in negotiations is considered carefully. It is the only message. It must have a high truth value.</td>
<td>The spoken word is not as carefully articulated as the written word. It is not the final message. It does not need to have a high truth value. The truth value of an utterance is only valid when it is in writing. Thus we say, &quot;Get it in writing!&quot; or &quot;Show it to me in writing.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issues are resolved quickly through personal, face to face negotiation with practical limitations on the size of the negotiating network.</td>
<td>Issues are resolved slowly through depersonalized committee structures with no practical limitations on the size of the negotiating network.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once agreed upon, a spoken contract between those who have the right to speak is locked in memory.</td>
<td>Once agreed upon, a spoken contract is only validated through the re-negotiation of a written contract. That contract or demand becomes more powerful when it is &quot;published&quot;.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power discourse must be stored in memory. Thus it is structured to aid in memory retention. Thus simple additive relationships and much repetition are favored in discourse.</td>
<td>Power discourse is packed with complex subordinated and nominalized language where processes, qualities, logical relations and assessments are expressed as nouns or adjectives (Martin, 1990).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a general past or present orientation in discourse.</td>
<td>There is a major focus on the future in discourse.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Many Aboriginal people have become functionally literate. However, outback Aboriginal culture is largely oral. Thus an oral culture is attempting to survive in a literate culture environment. Naturally there will be conflict as the two cultures interact.

I could provide many evidences of this conflict, but one stands out as being indicative of cultural conflict not between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, but between Aboriginal people. Among the Aboriginal people there are those who have crossed over to a high literate culture. These are usually younger people who have been urbanized and "accluturuated". They tend to live in the cities and try to assist Aboriginal people in coping with their significant personal and group problems. These people see things through literate culture eyes and are often seen as betraying traditional Aboriginal values. One such individual began making statements about Aboriginal land rights in The Bulletin, a current affairs weekly magazine of the Newsweek variety. Shortly after, a group of Aboriginal elders, obviously literate, but not from a literate culture, responded to his comments in a letter to the editor. They stated that:

We are four Kimberley elders touring Australia to launch our book Raparapa. We speak many Kimberly [sic] Aboriginal languages Walmajari, Nyikina, Bunapa, Guniyan, Tjuwaling--and we understand many others. We speak at the meetings in the Kimberley to our people in our languages.

We read your magazine and saw the letter from Rodney Rivers (B. March 21) claiming to be a spokesman for the Kimberley Aboriginal people. Rivers is one individual and he does not speak for any Kimberley Aboriginal people. He has not had a traditional education and he speaks only English. He lives in Toowoomba in Queensland on the other side of Australia. He is not initiated and has nothing to do with our people and has nothing to do with our law. He is not a Law man. He does not and cannot speak for the Law men of the Kimberley.

We have been speaking for ourselves. Our ancestors governed this country according to our laws for many thousands of years and we are still running this country and abiding by our laws, traditions and keeping our languages.....

The Kimberley Land Council invited Rivers to attend the council meeting to meet the representatives of all the Aboriginal groups in the Kimberley. He refused to face up to us. He did not come to the meeting at our invitation. How can he then claim to represent, somewhere in Queensland, people who he refuses to meet? (The Bulletin, April 11 1989).

Notice the values attached to the message. Basically they are; only the elders can speak for the people, we are the Elders, we have the right to speak, Rivers, although Aboriginal, does not have the right to speak. Rivers did not attend a face to face meeting so his comments are invalid.

This minor conflict underscores a dilemma facing Aboriginal culture. Aboriginal people want the power to control their own destiny. They
recognize that one way to achieve that power is to become literate, write books etc. as in the example above. Or, as Martin (1990) reports, Aboriginal leaders want their children to gain access to a "secret" language which, when mastered, offers empowerment. His reference to the language being secret comes from a number of sources including Bain (1979) who quotes an Aboriginal leader's views of educational needs:

We want them to learn. Not the kind of English you teach them in class, but your secret English. We don't understand that English, but you do. To us you seem to say one thing and do another. That's the English we want our children to learn (Bain, 1979).

and von Sturmer (1984) who states that:

The specific complaint, then, is that balanda (non-Aboriginal Australians) withhold the secret of their power, and that much of this 'power' is tied up with the 'big English' to which Aboriginal people are denied access. According to one interpretation, schools are failures because they fail to teach this 'power' (von Sturmer, 1984:273)

So Aboriginal people want "power" through literacy, but that power is interwoven with literate culture values which are in direct conflict with traditional oral culture values. And traditional Aboriginal people naturally do not want to lose their culture.

However, as I have tried to show with the Yirrkala example, it is possible for traditional Aboriginal people to adopt literate culture values while still retaining most of their oral culture. Stepping through the power value chart once again and relating it to the Yirrkala experience, we can see that the Yolngu of Yirrkala recorded their meetings by taking minutes and referring to the minutes of previous meetings thus enabling them to build their information store and to make progress towards their objectives. The Yolngu traditional leaders were prepared to compromise their sole "right to speak" in at least this one domain even to the point of allowing women to speak. They were prepared to use power written discourse addressed not only to individuals but also to institutions. The Yolngu did not trust the spoken word of Balanda institutions. Their demands were in writing and they wanted responses in writing. The Yolngu were prepared to function in committees thus depersonalizing their demands. They formed their own institutions through Action Groups and other committees. They created a power network that formed a lobby which was impossible to overlook. Contracts and demands were written and "published". They began to use the written discourse style we attribute to power language to a level that, when one significant demand was read, the Principal thought it could not have been written by a Yolngu, when in fact it was. And there was an obvious concern for the future.

CONCLUSION

What we have seen then, is the inculcation of literate culture values into a predominantly oral culture. These new values helped an oppressed, unempowered culture fight institutional racism and gain control over their community's educational processes. Is there anything in this that can be applied to situations outside of the Aboriginal context?
It might be argued that there are few exact situations other than the isolated indigenous populations in the Americas. That is true. However, I believe that there are some principles that could be applied to immigrant and refugee minority groups as well as indigenous populations.

We need to realize that programs which attempt to raise literacy levels of individuals from predominantly oral societies will succeed to a certain extent. Individual functional literacy may be achieved. However, often functional literacy can be defined as attaining a level of literacy in society which would allow one to function in that society to the level that the society's power structures will permit. Functional literacy alone will not "empower" an individual. I suspect there are many oral or oral residue non-native English speaking minority groups who daily face examples of institutional racism and insensitivity. These people are unempowered, but they do not have the tools to combat the oppression they may feel. As I have tried to show here, the adoption of key literate culture values would enable these people to mount a campaign that may eventually lead to the minority group gaining more control over their lives.

As ESL teachers, or literacy teachers I believe we can do much more than teach basic survival or functional literacy skills. We can teach the "secret" language, the literacy of power. I have referred to a paper written by Dr. Jim Martin a number of times. Dr. Martin is a linguist based at the University of Sydney. He spends a lot of time looking at the nature of empowered and unempowered language. In 1987, he visited another Aboriginal community, Lajamanu, with the purpose of examining the type of language teaching programs there. He found that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers were teaching children to write narratives through process methods. He pointed out that narrative writing does little to empower unempowered people and recommended that Aboriginal teachers and students be taught to write the "packed" empowered language.

Just before I left Australia in 1988, I received a radio-telephone call from a group of Lajamanu female teachers asking for me to visit Lajamanu and teach them how to write government submissions. I did not have time to do it because I was leaving Australia. And to be quite honest, I didn't know how to do it successfully. However, the writing of this paper has shown me an approach. With my present knowledge, I would go to Lajamanu and tell them about Yirrkala. I would hope that they would find an issue, establish committees and networks, decentralize tribal power structures, hold meetings, keep minutes, write letters and present submissions. I would hope that at times I would be asked to assist in the teaching of how to structure a letter, how to write a submission, but I would never write for them. By accident of birth and circumstance, I am a white, anglo-saxon, English speaking, well educated, married-with-children male with a respectable hair-style--I'm empowered in just about every category valued by the predominantly white, anglo-saxon, English speaking, male-dominated, conservative dominant social group. It is they who need to struggle against my culture's institutional racism. I can only provide a technology to aid in that battle. The technology is literacy-as-power.
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